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Whittaker impressive in triumphant return

By MIKE REGENSTREIF
for The Gazette

Roger Whittaker's triumphant and sold-out return to Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights was replete with well-deserved multiple encores and standing ovations.

After two numbers by Saffron, his back-up group, Whittaker, who possesses one of the most pleasant voices in pop music, strode onto the stage with all the confidence of the star that he is. Immediately he launched into the French-language version of Mammy Blue, one of his many two-language hits.

His audience was composed of both Anglo and Francophone members of Montreal's community and Whittaker acknowledged this by singing and talking in both languages. Important points of his stage patter were made bilingually.

The concert was divided into four sections and in turn Whittaker sang of a young man growing up, discovering love, becoming a husband and father and — finally — discovering the rest of the world around him.

Musically, Whittaker plays a number of styles. The British troubadour was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and some of his songs are based on the African rhythms that he heard as a small boy. He also dabbles in the calypso and blues idioms but the main thrust of his music is middle-of-the-road pop.

It should be noted however, that most of his songs have a lot more to appreciate in them than one normally associates with MOR music.

ROGER WHITTAKER
. . . bilingual star

BEST KNOWN

He performed some of his best known songs including Mon pays bleu, The Last Farewell, Une rose pour Isabelle, I don't Believe in If Anymore and New World In The Morning. In duet with Karen, the singer from his back-up group, he sang the old Everly Brothers tune, All I Have To Do Is Dream.

In all, Whittaker is a very impressive popular singer, deserving of the success that he has enjoyed.

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Belly to belly: Claudine Chatel and France Labrie dance as Helene Lasnier watches in Légère en août.

Punchless production is too cold to women

By JACK KAPICA
of The Gazette

At the risk of incensing Pro-Life and Women's Lib groups alike, it must be said that Denise Bonal's Légère en août, at the Theatre du Rideau Vert until Dec. 6, is a most irksome play.

Bonal, an Algerian-born playwright working in Paris, has taken it upon herself to examine the role of women in society with a vengeance. Here, she hallucinates a situation in the not-too-distant future where abortion is still illegal, but where women can legally sell their babies to sterile couples.

The action takes place in an institution where five women are awaiting the fruits of their labor. Each is a type — there is a funny pragmatist who finances her life with babies; there is her arch-enemy, a bitter pessimist who sees the rottenness of the system, finally to emerge as the real heroine; and there is the victimized Portuguese girl who wavers hysterically between hope and despair in her first time around.

Casts a pall

Aside from two other less consequential women, there is a monstrous headmistress, simply called "mademoiselle," whose presence casts a pall over the group and perhaps symbolizes Bonal's own jaded view of this situation.

The situation is strikingly fascinating in a perverse kind of way. It can be argued that the selling of babies does exist (though not legally) and that women today regard the production of offspring as a more tiresome duty than ever before.

And, in a way, showing the business of pregnancy in an entirely new light does give author Bonal an opportunity to explore the plight of modern woman with other coloring than the traditional greys and blacks of widely duties.

But it is entirely useless to continue to examine the implications of the predicament because Bonal is hardly the playwright to bring it across. So confused is her sense of the dramatic that one can never get sympathetically involved with the situation because one is always stumbling over the curious and malodorous premise.

This is also a problem with the play's director, Yvette Brind'Amour, whose chilly and aloof presentation freezes all positive reaction.

In the opening scene, for example, she bathes two new arrivals in the institution in frigid blue spotlights, with the "mademoiselle" playing a combination drill sergeant and Big Sister figure.

Lacks emotion

From then on, it's all downhill no matter how relevant are the problems discussed. The production finishes with a suicide of one of the women, a suicide handled so emotionlessly that it is pointless (perhaps an off-stage shriek could help).

The cast acquits itself with admirable strength considering the circumstances, particularly Claudine Chatel, as the happy pragmatist Ginette, and France Labrie, as the bitter realist.

The production only leaves one aching for a better handling of the question, one which is more sympathetic to women as human beings rather than as babbling egocentrics caught in a comic-book caricature of oppression.

Awful acoustics ruin Pollack's opera debut

By JACOB SISKIND
of The Gazette

It is nearly 20 years that the Opera Studio workshop has been functioning at McGill and in that time it has presented nearly 200 performances.

This weekend performances number 187, 188 and 189 were turned over to a full scale production of Benjamin Britten's The Rape of Lucretia on the stage of the new Pollack Concert Hall at the Faculty of Music.

It was an interesting test of the new facilities.

The stage at Pollack Hall has no proscenium so there is no curtain to hide the comings and goings of the performers and the stage hands. The pit under the lip of the stage is positively minscule and this was the first time it was being used for an operatic production.

The lighting in the hall is rudimentary and this was the first dry run for these facilities.

And, of course, there were the acoustics which have murdered so much other music presented in this hall thus far.

RESONANCE

To begin at the end, the resonance of the hall is such that speech is completely incomprehensible. Of course most singers never get around to pronouncing consonants anyway so that often isn't too much of a problem, but in this Britten opera, which is sung in English, it helps to know what is happening.

On Friday evening all of the members of the cast could easily have been singing in the original Etruscan for all one could make out. Even in slow, soft passages words ran into and over each other.

In a way this was a blessing, because the variety of accents that colored the production was really unbelievable. To have understood every word would have been impossible even in Studio 8-H.

As for the singing, it was mostly quite acceptable with some agreeable sounds coming from all of the ladies in the cast. The men were often too woolly sounding, but this may have been a function of the acoustics of the hall.

As for the orchestra, it was properly subdued and only very rarely did it swamp the singers. Eugene Plawutski had obviously rehearsed everything very carefully.

So much for the plusses.

STRANGE

On the red side of the ledger one must include the strange costumes which seemed oriental rather than Roman, and the even stranger set which had incredibly suggestive phallic designs emerging from the dim lighting. They might have been acceptable had they been intentional.

As for the staging, it suggested early Verdi rather that early Britten — and still less did it recall anything one had ever seen in which a chorus (Greek style) was present.

The whole production seemed to drag endlessly on, long after one had lost all hope of sustaining interest in the performance, visually or vocally.

If these words sound harsh, it is because it was obvious that a great deal of time and effort had been expended by all concerned and it was disappointing to see so much that was simply wrong-headed on the stage, particularly since so much good work had gone into the production.

A less pretentious production, a less complicated stage plot, a less involved lighting scheme and simpler costumes would have been far more effective — if a proper sense of pace had been maintained throughout.

In shows of this kind "less is more."

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Disco-Dance Party

Reno, Pagliaro pack 'em in

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

More than twice as many people as usual turned up at the Disco-Dance Party at Place Bonaventure on Saturday night. Starring Michel Pagliaro and Ginette Reno, the show was a smashing all-night success (8 p.m. until way after 3 p.m.), pulling in over 15,000 people and once again demonstrating the power of the local star system.

Similar rambling shows have been disasters, but the organizers were evidently well-equipped with two stages at either end of the hall, 16 licensed bars, and guaranteed non-stop music.

When Pagliaro and Reno were not performing half hour sets, there was the Bavarian Expo Oom-Pah Band, Muriel Day & the Night Train, disco records, numerous French disc jockeys and personalities, as well as English commentators Ralph Lockwood and Doug Pringle.

The dark, cavernlike hall was so full that traversing through the thousands of white cloth-covered tables was no picnic.

Exhibition Hall has the acoustics of a garage but when Pagliaro and Les Rockers came on, the vibrations were as solid as rock 'n' roll. Dressed in his familiar black jeans, black cycle jacket and sunglasses, Pag hung tough to the microphone, strummed rugged rhythm guitar, and became swept up in the loud boisterous sound. He doesn't have the moves of a jumping jack flash, but rather he sways to his hurricane sound.

His band slammed forth a concentrated pounding beat, with lead guitarist Walter Rossi cranking out measured bursts of electric fury, with the meaty rhythm section of Leon Feigenbaum and Marty Simon pushing Pag on.

Pag performed his huge Quebecois hit J'entends frapper, as well as numbers from his forthcoming album to be released worldwide.Ginette Reno had just returned from California, working on material for an international show, and she came equipped with a fancy orchestra and arrangements. Unfortunately, they didn't make the big sound needed to conquer the echo of the hall. However, Reno's voice is obviously still very strong and could easily be heard while her band was often just a blur.

Gazette, Tedd Church

Ginette Reno in action: Couldn't conquer echo

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